

The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 1995

The resumption of French nuclear testing was the international issue that most preoccupied the Pacific Island states in 1995. Nonetheless, concerns about sustainable development and the search for ways to promote it remained high on the regional agenda. In this respect, Australia became ever more insistent in its attempts to encourage responsible management of natural resources on the part of island governments, particularly with regard to logging in Melanesia. In the year under review mineral exploitation was once more the object of controversy. Apart from the continuing conflict in Bougainville, there were compensation claims by landowners at the Ok Tedi mine, and, most disturbing, the Indonesian military perpetrated a series of human rights abuses against West Papuans near the Freeport mine in Irian Jaya.

The June announcement by newly elected French President Jacques Chirac that a final series of nuclear weapons tests would be held in French Polynesia provoked an angry response from the region. Islander concerns focused on the dangers underground tests posed to the environment and to the health of people living in the vicinity of the test sites. Antinuclear sentiment was also driven by fears that a test resumption would set back or possibly derail negotiations for a comprehensive test ban treaty.

Unilateral measures by Australia included the suspension of elements of defense cooperation with France and a diplomatic offensive to rally opposi-

tion to the French test resumption in the United Nations, in Europe, and in France itself. New Zealand also employed diplomatic sanctions and, in September, unsuccessfully attempted to revive its 1973 case against French nuclear testing in the International Court of Justice.

The concerted campaign by regional nations to stop the tests was led by Australia, which used its position as chair of the South Pacific Forum to maximize the regional response. Australia drafted a statement of protest to France issued on behalf of the Forum and led a delegation to Paris in June. Forum environment ministers met in Brisbane in August to discuss the ecological impact of the impending French test series. They issued a communiqué arguing that the tests would contravene two international environment treaties to which France was party (SPREP and UNCLOS). Their request for an independent scientific mission to undertake an environmental impact assessment at the site before testing commenced was refused by France.

As part of the antinuclear protest the Forum considered a proposal to boycott the tenth Pacific Games to be hosted by French Polynesia in August, but ultimately most Forum countries decided to participate in the event. At its twenty-sixth annual meeting, held 13–15 September in Madang, Papua New Guinea, the Forum issued a strong collective statement condemning the resumption of French testing several days earlier. The declaration called on France to pay compensation

for any environmental damage caused by the tests. The sixteen nations also warned that if France proceeded with a second test its status as a post-Forum Dialogue Partner would be suspended. This threat to sever diplomatic ties with France was carried out by Sir Julius Chan, the new chair of the Forum, in the wake of another explosion in early October.

Pacific Islanders were not appeased by hastily formulated French commitments to shut down the test site, sign the protocols to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, and adhere to a zero-yield comprehensive test ban once the planned test series was completed. Instead island governments demonstrated their determination to oppose French testing in various ways. For example, Western Samoa banned visits to its territory by French military ships and planes, the Cook Islands sent a protest canoe to Moruroa, and Nauru and Kiribati suspended diplomatic relations with France after the first test. Popular protests throughout the region maintained the momentum of the antinuclear campaign.

The resumption of testing revived regional interest in the remnants of French colonialism in the Pacific, especially French Polynesia. Protests by the Tahitian independence movement received extensive and sympathetic coverage in the international media and attracted rhetorical support from regional leaders. France was widely held responsible for provoking the destructive riots that took place in Pape'ete after the first test in September. These riots erupted not only in response to the nuclear test, but also as a result of disaffection by indigenous

youth because of their low socioeconomic status in the territory.

Nevertheless, nuclear testing has not acted as a catalyst for rapid decolonization. The majority of Tahitians still do not support secessionist parties, mainly because of the territory's overwhelming economic dependence on France. In addition, the Madang Forum declined to link its antinuclear campaign with decolonization, noting that the future of French Pacific dependencies was a matter to be decided by France and the territories. However, the Forum did announce its intention to scrutinize preparations for New Caledonia's 1998 referendum on independence.

On a positive note, delegates to the Madang Forum felt there had been progress with regard to fisheries in 1995. In particular, Forum members welcomed the adoption in August of the Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) relating to the conservation and management of straddling fish stocks and highly migratory fish stocks. The agreement opened for signature in December. Forum leaders felt that comprehensive regional fisheries management arrangements, and a structure in line with UNCLOS obligations to administer them, should be developed as a matter of urgency.

Member countries of the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) continued their campaign to obtain multilateral fishing access arrangements with Asian countries, similar to the one that currently exists with the United States. FFA missions were sent to Korea and Taiwan to discuss this proposal, and these two

countries look likely to be the first to agree to multilateral terms, whereas Japan remained suspicious of the concept and preferred bilateral ties. In recent years, one of the region's bargaining strengths with distant-water fishing nations has been a unified approach to fisheries negotiations, but cracks were beginning to appear in FFA solidarity. The Federated States of Micronesia has expressed the view that countries rich in tuna, like itself and Kiribati, are not getting a fair deal out of the multilateral treaty with the United States, because they are effectively subsidizing other FFA countries with fewer fish stocks. FSM Foreign Minister Asterio Takesy claimed sub-regional and bilateral fisheries access arrangements had been more beneficial to his country in the past and could well be so in the future.

The Forum Fisheries Agency continued its efforts to prevent poaching and increase returns from fish stocks to the island nations. Plans are underway by the agency to develop a vessel monitoring system to be installed on foreign fishing vessels; it would greatly facilitate FFA's monitoring of vessel movements and catch reports. Another issue of concern to the agency is that, despite the huge catch taken in Pacific waters, the fishing industry provides few jobs for Pacific Islanders. It is devising schemes to promote more high seas fishing by local vessels and to encourage foreign companies to use services and facilities in the islands themselves. Finally, Director Victorio Uherbelau recommended that the French and United States Pacific territories either have associate membership or some other form of increased

involvement in the Forum Fisheries Agency.

Overexploitation of timber remained an issue of great concern to the Forum and, notably, to Australia as the region's primary aid donor. Asian timber companies, mainly from Malaysia, continued to log Melanesian forests at unsustainable levels and provided inadequate financial returns to host governments. Vanuatu had earlier initiated controls to stop the rapacious exploitation of its forests. The Papua New Guinea government was under extreme pressure from the World Bank to improve its forestry practices as a condition for receiving a major loan. In the Solomon Islands, however, logs continue to be harvested at several times the sustainable rate. Systematic logging of West Papuan forests is also under way but, as a province of Indonesia, Irian Jaya is beyond the purview of the Forum.

The Madang Forum wanted to adopt a "Code of Conduct on Logging" to enforce sustainable forestry management in the principal Pacific logging countries. Because of stiff resistance from the Melanesian states, the code was endorsed but not formally adopted. As a result it is not legally binding and, if they see fit, individual countries can continue unsustainable logging practices. In a separate move, the Australian government decided in December to ban imports of timber from countries that do not have appropriately managed forests, in line with a United Nations Tropical Timber Agreement recently signed by Australia.

The Solomon Islands had begun to implement forestry reforms under the

government of Billy Hilly. These reforms included the establishment of a Timber Control Unit funded by Australia to curb malpractice by foreign timber companies. The change in government and return to power of Solomon Mamaloni in late 1994 led to these reforms being reversed in 1995. Following the Madang Forum, which Prime Minister Mamaloni did not attend, the Solomons government shut down the Timber Control Unit. Far from reining in harvest rates, Mamaloni has allowed the pace of logging to accelerate under his administration. At the current rate it is predicted that timber stocks in the Solomons will be exhausted within ten to fifteen years. As log exports provide the government's main source of cash, the inevitable depletion of the forests is likely to push the country into bankruptcy.

In recent years the Australian government has taken an increasingly dim view of what it perceives as short-sighted resource management by some island countries. Intimations were made that future Australian aid would be conditional on the implementation of reforms to conserve natural resources. Prior to the Madang meeting, Australia's Minister for Pacific Island Affairs Gordon Bilney issued a final ultimatum: "If the leaders of a country do not have the best interests of their citizenry at heart . . . then no amount of aid will save them. Indeed, to continue to give aid in those circumstances is to condone and encourage malfeasance and poor government" (*IB*, Oct 1995, 26). The dire warning was fulfilled in December, when Australia withdrew its aid from the Solomon Islands natural resource sec-

tor and terminated support for the Timber Control Unit. This measure amounted to an annual reduction in bilateral aid from A\$11.2 million to A\$9 million. The funds were to be diverted to "more responsible" Pacific Island countries.

The Papua New Guinea government was also highly critical of Australia. Relations with Australia became acrimonious after several instances in which Papua New Guinea officials criticized the substance of bilateral military cooperation and Australia's progressive shift from budgetary support to project aid. Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan went so far as to accuse Australia of meddling in Papua New Guinea's internal affairs. Australia rejoined that it merely sought greater accountability for its aid.

The unprecedented move in Australian aid policy toward the Solomons has broader ramifications for the Pacific Islands at a time when other sources of aid are dwindling as, except for Japan, major donors turn their attention elsewhere. Island countries have been put on notice that if Australia's minimum criteria for responsible government are not met they must suffer the consequences. Australian policy, and especially Minister Bilney's doomsday rhetoric, have raised charges from some island governments that Australia is once again aspiring to an unwelcome "big brother" role in relation to Pacific microstates.

Another demonstration of Australia's desire to play a more influential role in regional politics was an aggressive, and ultimately successful, campaign to have its candidate chosen as the new secretary-general of the South

Pacific Commission (SPC). Australia, which is the commission's biggest donor, had expressed dissatisfaction with management of the body in recent years. Outgoing Secretary-General Ati George Sokomanu and a Fijian candidate, Jioji Kotobalavu, were out of the running before it came to the final vote at the annual SPC conference in Noumea in October. The contest was between New Zealand's Māori candidate, Tia Barrett, and the retired Australian diplomat, Bob Dun. As former head of the Australian aid agency, AusAid, Dun was well qualified, but for a quarter of a century Pacific Islanders had held the post. There were misgivings in the region over the abandonment of this tradition of indigenous leadership.

In a move to resolve a contentious environmental issue, the Madang Forum adopted the Waigani "Convention to Ban the Importation into Forum Island Countries of Hazardous and Radioactive Wastes." The idea for a regional ban on the hazardous waste trade dates from the Nauru Forum in 1993. The initiative was in response to repeated efforts by foreign companies to negotiate the export of toxic waste to island states. The Forum sought to prohibit the import of hazardous and radioactive wastes generated outside the region and to safely control the passage of such wastes being transhipped through the Pacific Ocean.

In May 1995, regional concern about hazardous waste had mounted after a decision by the Marshall Islands government to go ahead with a feasibility study for importing and storing radioactive waste on a commercial basis. Given the history of nuclear test-

ing, which contaminated many Marshallese atolls and affected the health of their inhabitants, the proposal to host radioactive waste dumps seemed surprising. It reflected a desperate attempt by an atoll nation with few natural resources to find economic alternatives to American aid. Under the 1986 Compact of Free Association with the United States, funding to the Marshalls was to be phased out by the year 2001. US aid accounted for about sixty percent of the Marshallese gross domestic product before the first major cut of US\$5 million in 1995.

Marshallese advances to waste traders in Asia were countered by the Forum's adoption in September of the Waigani convention banning such practices. In December it was appropriate that Papua New Guinea, both as originator of the proposal and chair of the meeting that adopted the treaty, was first to ratify it. Fourteen members have signed, and it must be ratified by ten countries before it enters into force. This is a matter of urgency because low-lying coral atolls are among the worst possible sites for the storage of hazardous wastes, especially with the prospect of rising sea levels as a result of global warming. The area of the new treaty, in which the import and storage of imported wastes will be banned, encompasses the national territories together with the high seas enclosed by their exclusive economic zones.

Despite its obvious merits, the Waigani convention is significantly weaker in its controls over hazardous waste than the Bamako Convention that covers Africa. The Forum's convention has allowed loopholes to the

extent that it does not stop transshipments of radioactive waste through the zone. Nor does the Waigani convention contain an obligation to prevent or minimize the generation of radioactive waste within the region; it thus has no jurisdiction over waste produced by France as a result of nuclear testing.

Mineral exploitation in Melanesia continues to raise concerns with regard to regional security and human rights. Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea were beset by increasing social unrest and violence arising from the conflict between indigenous landowners on the one hand, and multinational mining companies in league with national governments on the other. Apart from the ongoing crisis in Bougainville—which had its origins in local discontent over the Panguna mine—disputes have emerged around the Ok Tedi mining operations, and serious human rights abuses have occurred in connection with the giant Freeport gold mine in Irian Jaya.

The Bougainville crisis marked its seventh year with intermittent clashes between the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) and Papua New Guinea Defence Forces. A positive development was the establishment of the Bougainville Transitional Government in April, set up by moderate forces and led by the former BRA partisan, Theodore Miriung. Further progress was achieved with the restoration of limited services to the island as a result of the transitional government's cooperation with the government in Port Moresby. Via the Waigani Communiqué in May, the Papua New Guinea government also made a con-

ciliatory gesture by granting amnesty to Bougainville Interim Government and BRA leaders for alleged treason and other offenses.

A breakthrough occurred in September in the form of a Bougainville meeting held on neutral ground in Cairns, Australia. There, for the first time since 1990, representatives of the BRA and its political arm, the Bougainville Interim Government, began discussions with the transitional government and Bougainville Members of Parliament to find a lasting peace for the troubled island. At the end of a subsequent five-day meeting in December, Bougainville leaders issued a twelve-point communiqué in which the delegations committed themselves to "enter into a process of dialogue that will permit the achievement of a political settlement to the Bougainville conflict." The Papua New Guinea government was not represented at these talks, but the understandings obtained at Cairns are subject to its approval.

The Bougainville leaders also agreed to continuing involvement by the secretary-general of the United Nations and the secretary-general of the Commonwealth in ongoing discussions. After further preparatory meetings, a new round of talks is scheduled to be held in Bougainville in March–April 1996. The agenda includes pressing issues such as the cessation of violence on the island, the protection of human rights, and the resumption of socioeconomic development. Agreement was also reached to allow medical services access to the island. As a priority, Premier Miriung emphasized the need for Bougainville leaders to establish a

common stance on the island's future political status as a basis for negotiations with the Papua New Guinea government.

In another case of conflict over mining operations, controversy surrounds the behavior of the multinational Broken Hill Propriety Limited in relation to its Ok Tedi copper mine. In August, the company had signed a deal with the Papua New Guinea government to compensate local landowners for damage caused to the Ok Tedi and Fly Rivers by the mine. Yet, the company's reputation was later tarnished by its attempts to deny villagers any future right to sue the company for polluting rivers downstream of the mine. Broken Hill Proprietary was found guilty of contempt by an Australian court in September because it had helped shape Papua New Guinea legislation to outlaw any additional compensation to Ok Tedi landowners at a time when the court was hearing a claim by these landowners. In view of experiences at Bougainville and Ok Tedi, there are grave concerns about the adequacy of environmental standards to be applied by the proposed Lihir gold mine in Papua New Guinea's New Ireland Province and its potential impact on the local people's environment and lifestyle.

In 1995, a series of exposés documented serious human rights abuses committed by the Indonesian armed forces against indigenous West Papuans living in the vicinity of the mine run by the American-based multinational, Freeport, in Irian Jaya. This was the culmination of a long history of bad relations between the mining giant and the local Amungme people

since their lands were appropriated for mining in 1967.

An absence of consultation and the exclusion of the indigenous people from the process of exploiting natural resources has been the main source of conflict between West Papuans and the Indonesian government. Forcible displacement of the indigenous people has occurred, without compensation, in order to free up land for extensive forestry, hydroelectric dam projects, and mining operations. Mining concessions have been the locations of major uprisings and brutal reprisals by security forces. Freeport's mining installations were first attacked by the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) or Free Papua Movement and local Amungme people in 1977. The Indonesian military retaliated by bombing villages and resorting to harsh reprisals on civilians and their property.

Local people, with the support of the OPM, have recently been demonstrating against an expansion of the Freeport mining concession, which now totals 3.6 million hectares. Indigenous protests have focused on land dispossession, the forced resettlement of villages to malarial areas, and the environmental damage caused by the mine, especially its pollution of waterways. The Indonesian government's response to these demonstrations was once again to employ military force against local people, both OPM and civilians, including women and children.

Revelations of the recent human rights abuses began with a report issued by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid in April. The extent of atrocities committed by security forces was subsequently confirmed by three

independent investigations carried out by the Australian ambassador to Indonesia, by the Indonesian Human Rights Commission, and by the Catholic Church in Jayapura, Irian Jaya. Although figures vary as to the number of people affected by these activities, a leaked report by the Australian ambassador conservatively estimated that at least twenty-two West Papuans had been killed by the military in the Freeport concession area between June 1994 and June 1995. In addition to these cases of summary execution and murder, four people disappeared, numerous civilians were subject to arbitrary arrest and detention, and most of the victims experienced torture at the hands of the security forces. These incidents all occurred in or near Freeport mine facilities.

Considerable concern has been expressed in the region, particularly among nongovernment organizations and the media, over the plight of West Papuans in the Freeport area. The Australian government responded strongly at first, by sending a fourteen-

member delegation to the province to investigate the situation in July. Furthermore, Australia urged Indonesia to undertake a thorough inquiry of its own and take appropriate measures to prevent further abuses. Since then, Australia's enthusiastic signing of a treaty on security with Indonesia in December has placed doubt on its freedom or willingness to criticize the Indonesian military forces in the future. The human rights situation in Irian Jaya was not formally discussed at the Madang Forum, despite calls by the parallel meeting of nongovernment organizations for it to be placed on the Forum agenda.

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